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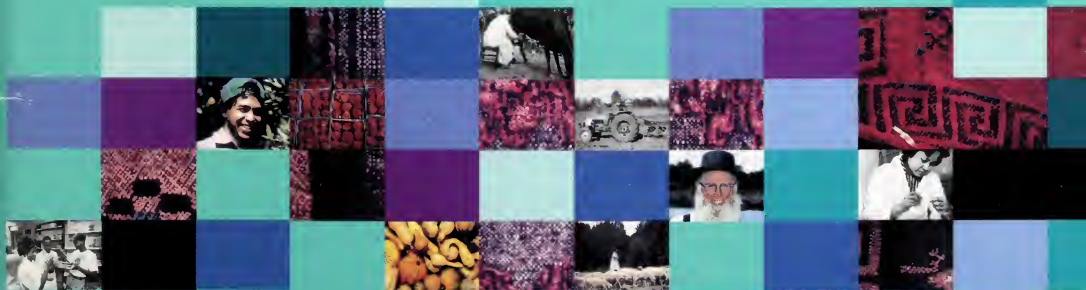
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Farm Service Agency

Minority Farmers
Enriching the *Tapestry*
of
American
Agriculture

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**United States
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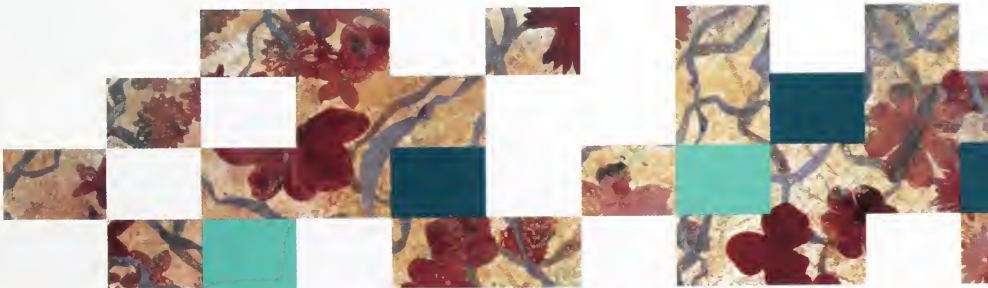
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Cataloging Prep

*A*merican agriculture as we know it today has developed from the mixing of ideas and practices shared by the many racial and ethnic groups that have come together in the United States over more than 400 years. All of these groups have brought rich histories of innovation and contribution to our agricultural economy and rural life.

Much like the threads of a tapestry, these farmers and their families and communities have become woven into the landscape of the American countryside. The gifts they have made to the improvement of food production, to the diversity of the American diet, and to the vitality of rural places have become so familiar that we may no longer know their origins.

To inform and remind us of the richness and variety of minority influences on the development of U.S. agriculture and rural life, the U.S. Department of Agriculture offers this brochure and exhibit. Although only a few examples can be included, they represent an almost infinite number of ways in which the strength of this Nation's food system and rural roots have been shaped by the diversity of its people.



African-Americans: Sharing the Fruits of Experience and Ingenuity

African-Americans have contributed to American agriculture since first setting foot on American soil. First as slaves, later as sharecroppers, migrants, and independent farmers, African-American labor helped build the great wealth of southern agriculture. But their contributions went far beyond labor: from Africa they brought crops like peanuts and sesame that have become staples of the American diet; from their experience in the plantation agriculture system, they produced such innovations as a prototype of the cotton gin.



Leaders like George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington built on the agricultural experience of African-Americans to develop new research and an educational system tailored to the needs of working farmers. Carver's agricultural experiments improved productivity on southern farms and developed new uses for crops like sweetpotatoes and peanuts. Washington's emphasis on practical agricultural education, including mobile schools to reach farmers in their communities, provided models that have been used to assist not only small and limited-resource farmers, but larger commercial operations as well.

In more recent years, although the number of farms operated by African-Americans has decreased dramatically, African-Americans continue to provide leadership in efforts to preserve minority farms. Many others contribute leadership in agricultural research and education through the historically black land-grant college system.



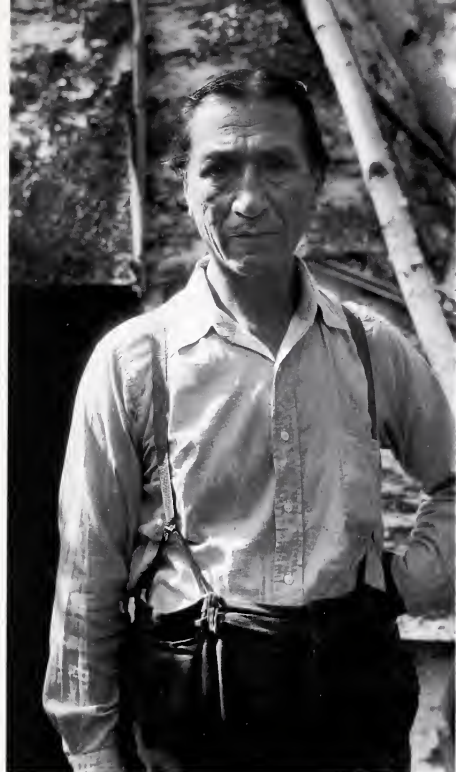
Native Americans: Sharing the Secrets of New World Farming



Native Americans have shared indigenous crops and agricultural techniques across 4 centuries. American Indians along the east coast and in the Southwest introduced such crops as corn, squash, beans, and tobacco to the first English and Spanish settlers in the late 16th century. In the late 20th century, Native Americans have identified plant varieties with valuable traits like drought resistance for use in molecular genetics.

The diversity of Native American agriculture defies brief description. Having coped with forced migrations, inhospitable climates, and changing policies over many centuries, their ingenuity and perseverance are reflected in the vitality and variety of their agricultural practices. From sheep ranching in the desert Southwest to harvesting wild rice on the lakes of the Upper Midwest, from cattle and bison ranching on the Great Plains to diverse small-scale farming along the east coast, and from fishing in the Southeast to reindeer herding in Alaska, Native Americans effectively mix traditional practices with modern innovations.

Through the leadership and advocacy of such Native American institutions as the Intertribal Agriculture Council and the tribal college system, agriculture's place in Native American economies and cultures remains secure.



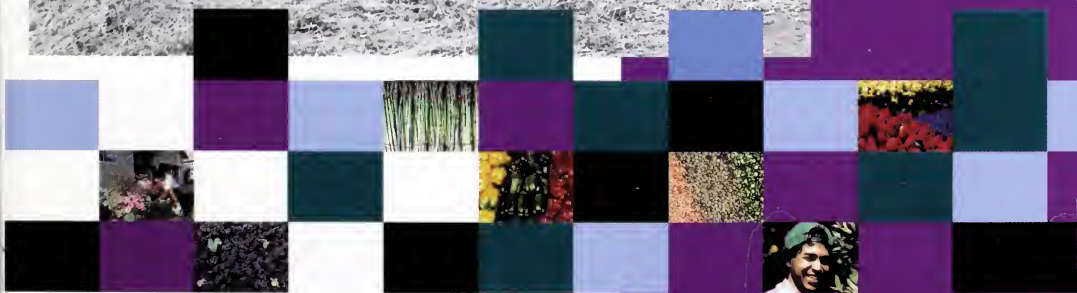
Hispanics: From *Rancheros* To *Braceros*

Hispanic influences on American agriculture date back to Spanish exploration and settlement of northwestern Mexico, now the American Southwest. Explorers and settlers introduced horses, cattle, and other Spanish agricultural traditions to the region, altering indigenous farming practices. On their large land grants, Spanish *rancheros* established many of the open-range western cattle ranching practices that survived into the late 19th century.



In the 20th century, Hispanics have been most visible in agriculture as farm workers. As *braceros*, Mexican guest-workers hired by U.S. growers, or as Mexican-American migrant workers and day laborers who follow the seasonal crop patterns on their own, Hispanic workers have brought experienced, skilled labor to American agriculture.

Just as the number of Hispanics in the American population continues to grow, the number of Hispanic farm operators has grown in recent years, from 17,476 in 1987 to 27,717 in 1997. With that 59-percent increase, Hispanics are the fastest growing minority group among American farm operators.



Asians and Pacific Islanders: A Diverse Minority

Asians and Pacific Islanders make up perhaps the most diverse minority in U.S. agriculture. Representing widely differing ethnicities, they have entered American agriculture primarily in two waves.



In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, native Hawaiians and imported South and East Asian workers, including, for example, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, and Sikhs from northern India, provided labor for sugar cane, fruit and nut, and vegetable growers in the Hawaiian Islands and along the Pacific coast.

In the late 20th century, Vietnamese and Hmong refugees, among others from Southeast Asia, have introduced new foods and agricultural patterns, as well as broader cultural diversity to many rural areas.

Many of these immigrants eventually have become growers and small farmers themselves. They have tended to concentrate in specialty agriculture – fruit and tree nuts, vegetables, and horticultural crops – and are located primarily in Hawaii, California, and the Pacific Northwest.



Women: From Home to Field to Lab

Women have influenced American agriculture widely, both as individuals and as members of families and community groups. Women have performed the traditional female roles of family farming, including child care, housework, food preparation, gardening, and care of dairy cows, poultry, and other small livestock. They have supported their farming communities through traditional women's activities in churches, schools, and women's groups.



But they have also worked in the fields and contributed to the development of American agricultural practices. Native American women, for example, as the principal farmers in ancient communities, domesticated many agricultural commodities. Later experimentation by individual women farmers was responsible for the introduction of indigo as a commercial crop in the 18th century, for the adoption of navel oranges on the west coast in the 19th century, and for the development of blueberries as a commercial crop in the 20th century. Women have also contributed extensively to the related fields of food science and nutrition, both in government and private industry.

As family members and as paid workers, as farm operators and as landlords, as activists, as educators, and as inventors, women have been leaders and partners in every aspect of American agriculture.



Other Minorities: A Reflection of American Diversity



American agriculture has been enhanced by as wide a variety of ethnic and religious minorities as American society at large. German and Scandinavian immigrant communities, for example, introduced agricultural patterns that have come to seem so quintessentially American they are no longer recognized as ethnically distinct. Amish and Conservative Mennonite communities, on the other hand, have remained identifiably separate by preserving traditional beliefs and practices in the midst of modern development, practices which are now being adopted as the basis for new, more sustainable farming methods.

Members of the Mormon Church pioneered dry farming and irrigation techniques as they established settlements in the thinly populated desert regions of the West. Jewish farmers, on the other hand, remained near population centers and developed small, specialized farms that served growing urban markets. Rediscovery of such specialized farming communities reflects an agricultural heritage often invisible to a predominantly urban society.

Americans with disabilities have also influenced and been influenced by U.S. agriculture. New technologies developed for farm accident victims have provided innovations with broader uses, while development of farm-based projects as educational tools and mental health therapies have made new techniques available to mental health professionals.



Federal Initiatives: Protecting Diversity for the 21st Century

Federal agencies have made efforts over the years to protect and assist minorities in agriculture. The Homestead Act, for example, provided free land to those who would improve it, making farms affordable for many immigrants. More recently, USDA's Farm Loan Program has provided low-cost credit to minority farmers and ranchers to purchase and operate farms.



The 1890 Morrill Act required the establishment of a land-grant college system to serve African-Americans, and its amendments in 1994 provided funding to support agricultural education for Native Americans through the tribal college system. Targeted programs, from the Resettlement Administration of the 1930's to the more recent Outreach and Technical Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers (2501) program, have been created to reach minority farmers where more traditional programs have failed.

USDA has periodically faced charges of discrimination in implementing its programs. In early 1997, the Department launched a civil rights review that acknowledged inequities and established new initiatives to provide program services and opportunities to minority farmers.

As we enter a new millennium, USDA has renewed its commitment to ensuring that minority farmers will remain a vital part in the tapestry that is American agriculture.



To Find Out More . . .

For further sources of information on minorities in U.S. agriculture, contact Special Collections of the National Agricultural Library at 301-504-5876 (telephone), 301-504-7593 (fax), speccoll@nal.usda.gov (email), or visit the Web site at <http://www.nal.usda.gov/speccoll/>.

The exhibit “Minority Farmers: Enriching the Tapestry of American Agriculture” was created by a team of individuals from the Economic Research Service, the National Agricultural Library, and the Office of Communications. The images are drawn from the following collections: Special Collections of the National Agricultural Library; Economic Research Service; USDA Photography Center; and Agricultural Research Service.

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